OF NUMBERS AND LETTERS (THE LATTER ARE M, A, P, H, AND D)

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The life of the Canadian graduate student in history is a pampered one. There is no denying it. Yet at the same time, graduate studies – doctoral studies, especially – become for many individuals a source of great anxiety, of great anguish. It is not so much the historian's investigation of the past that poses difficulties, for the frustrations of the archives and the pain of writing tend to be amply compensated by the delight of discovery and joy of understanding. It is, rather, thoughts of the future that prove disheartening. This is less true, it must be said, of master's students. They acquire valuable skills and significantly increased their professional prospects in very little time, a year, or two at the worst. Doctoral students, on the other hand, resolve to mortgage four, five, six, seven, eight, or more years of their lives, and to make significant financial investments. Many of them begin to worry, not unreasonably, as they realize that the number of their peers appears on the continual increase even as the number of permanent positions seems to stagnate or, depending on the field, decline. Having dared to dream of eventually achieving the hallowed status of "History Professor", countless doctoral candidates begin to worry about their prospects.

Sensing such fears, advisors and other professors are wont to tell their students that the current climate is not all that terrible; that when they were completing their own graduate studies, job prospects were equally bleak; but that somehow, things all worked out for them; and that things *will work out for you*. Most students are enheartened by such pep talks (thus, a note to all professors reading this: please keep it up.) But many will be unconvinced by such testimonials, and will soon return to worrying. Anecdotal and impressionistic evidence can only reassure to a certain extent. Which brings up the question: are there no hard indicators of trends in the contours of graduate programs and of the job market?

As it turns out, finding such numbers is not as easy as it might first seem. The Canadian Historical Association has apparently never kept track of how many students, graduate or undergraduate, enter or complete a history program each year. The Chairs of Canadian history departments have for many years been invited to give, during the Chairs' meeting which is held in conjunction with the CHA's annual meeting, brief reports of the activity of each of their departments, including graduate admissions and job openings. But until now such information was merely reported orally, and went unrecorded. As of next year, written reports will be solicited which may then be aggregated by the CHA's executive coordinator. With time, this new mechanism should allow for a better sense of the state of the field. It will either reassure worried graduate students, or give more solid bases to their fears. In the meanwhile, I thought it of some interest to publish the findings of my own investigation into the matter. Unfortunately, in light of the difficulties faced in finding relevant statistics, I was unable to get beyond the issue of the number of graduate students enrolled and graduating from Canadian history departments. Those only interested in the state of the country's job market will have to wait for a later issue of the *Bulletin*.

The Canadian Association for Graduate Studies (CAGS) produced in 2008 a *37th Statistical Report*, which contains figures by disciplinary field for the years 1992-2005.[1] Extracting the numbers relevant to history programs, we come up with the following table. The totals, of enrolled students and of degrees awarded, are in bold. The most alert readers will note that the frequencies are rounded off to a multiple of three, and that the sums do not necessarily correspond with the stated totals, owing to this rounding and to the exclusion of the "undeclared gender" category. This may not be perfect, but it will have to do.

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
MA enrollment (total)	**1383**	**1338**	**1299**	**1254**	**1206**	**1173**	**1104**	**1149**	**1173**	**1209**	**1263**	**1314**
Women	600	597	609	609	543	573	540	555	555	594	660	606
International students	63	42	48	57	36	36	33	42	42	48	75	54
PHD enrollment (total)	**849**	**870**	**849**	**810**	**786**	**744**	**693**	**669**	**684**	**699**	**777**	**750**
Women	354	372	360	351	351	339	312	294	297	297	342	327
International students	81	90	87	87	87	81	75	78	78	87	78	81
MAs awarded (total)	**396**	**390**	**417**	**381**	**396**	**399**	**351**	**360**	**363**	**402**	**393**	**423**
Women	171	171	186	171	216	180	183	171	180	201	198	210
International students	21	21	9	15	24	12	12	12	21	12	21	21
PHDs awarded (total)	**60**	**66**	**87**	**93**	**81**	**99**	**75**	**84**	**69**	**90**	**75**	**81**
Women	24	15	33	33	27	39	36	48	33	33	24	30
International students	3	6	6	6	9	9	6	6	6	6	9	12

As of 2005, enrolment had not surpassed its height of 1994 (for the MA) and 1995 (for the PhD). During the second half of the 1990s there occurred a decrease in enrolment, and accordingly admissions, which was followed by an increase since 2000 (more apparent with the MAs than PhDs).

This tendency was apparently generalized in North American universities: between 1995 and 2000, the number of graduate students in all disciplines diminished substantially. An over-abundance of newly minted doctors and resulting "job crisis", was blamed, and it was suggested that by word of mouth this discouraged new applicants. If we situate the above noted data in the context of the *37th Statistical Report*, we can also point to a decrease of the relative enrolment in history as compared with the whole of graduate studies. While historians represented 2% and 3.1% of MA and PhD students, respectively, in 1994, they represented only 1.4% and 2% by 2005. Here again, this reflects a broader trend.

The data reported by CAGS suggests more questions than answers. How are various fields represented within the whole? What are the provincial trends? What were the trends before 1994? And most importantly, to address the preoccupations of current doctoral students and of those who are considering doctoral studies, what are the trends since 2005? In an attempt to provide a tentative answer to the last question, I must turn to our southern neighbours. Robert B. Townsend, Assistant Director of Research and Publications for the American Historical Association, has for some time and with great energy been collecting and analyzing all sorts of statistics relating to the historical profession. His most recent analyses take into account Canadian departments listed in the AHA's online register of History Doctoral Programs in the United States and Canada, and which answered a detailed survey during the summer of 2007 (the data for 2008 had not yet been analyzed when I submitted this column).[2] Townsend counted 671 doctoral students in history in Canadian universities that year (compared to 8529 in the United States).

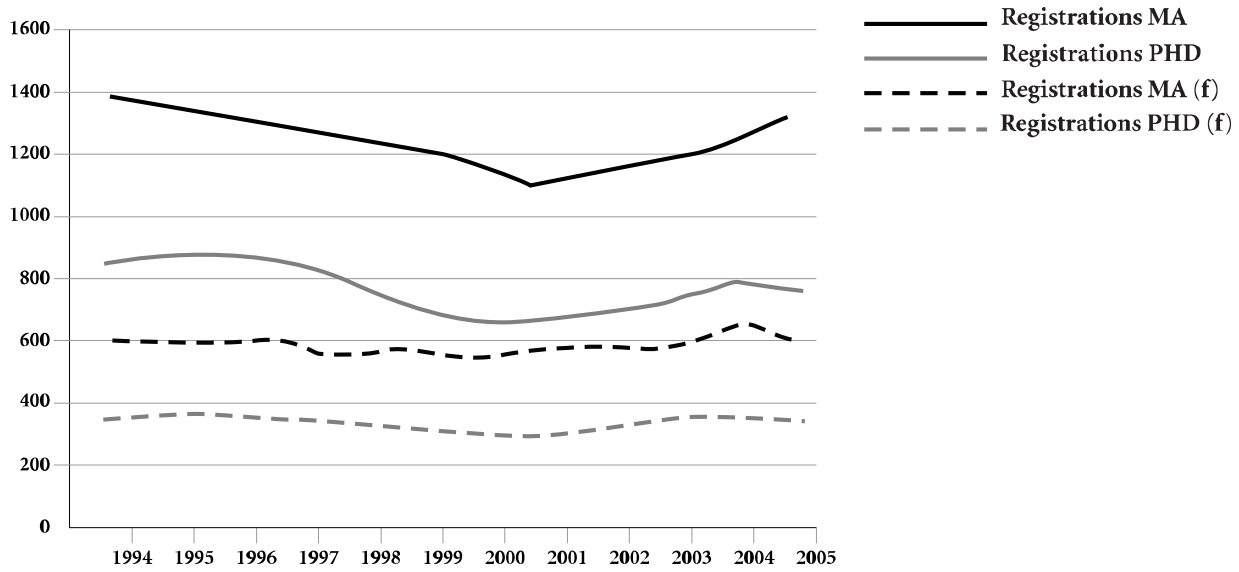
Like CAGS's data, the AHA's is subject to revision. A few universities (Laval, among others), did not respond to Townsend's survey and were accordingly left out of the calculations. Such reservations aside, Townsend pushes his analysis in interesting directions. He observes, for example, a decline in the number of PHD applications received in Canadian history departments: from an average of 31.9 in 2006-7 to 24.8 in 2007-8 (over the same period, the average number of applications received in American universities swelled from 74.1 to 80.9). Canadian universities, he goes on to report, nevertheless expected to admit a few more students than the previous year: from an average of 5.3 admissions in 2006-7 to 6.0 in 2007-8. If true, this would be worrying trend. Over a longer period, between 1997-8 to 2007-8, Townsend observes an important increase in the number of admissions to Canadian doctoral programs, which almost tripled from about 2 to 5 students.

Wishing to get a better sense of the paths taken by doctoral students and the attrition rate among them, Robert Townsend collected data during the summers of 2006 and 2007 relating to students who had been admitted to the PhD five and ten years earlier – in other words, the cohorts admitted in 1996, 1997, 2001, and 2003. The table below was drafted in accordance with his results. The percentages refer to the percentages of students in each cohort; the boxes marked with asterisks were not calculated or reported by him.

	After five years				**After ten years**			
	(Cohort of 2001-2)		(Cohort of 2002-3)		(Cohort of 1996-7)		(Cohort of 1997-8)	
	Can.	É.-U.	Can.	É.-U.	Can.	É.-U.	Can.	É.-U.
Completed	35%	24%	*	*	49%	59%	57%	49%
Still enrolled	46%	55%	*	*	4%	9%	*	18%
Abandoned	13%	16%	11%	21%	41%	26%	39%	33%
Uncertain	7%	5%	*	*	3%	7%	*	0%

It goes without saying that this data must be taken with a grain of salt. Here again, the totals do not always add up. And as Townsend points out, attrition rates are particularly difficult to estimate, because departments vary in their way of counting registered students and drop-outs, and because departments are often hesitant to concede that one of their students has abandoned the program. Furthermore, it is not clear if and how the AHA's statistics take into account the difference between the Canadian model, where the outstanding majority of new doctoral students already have an MA, and the American one, where direct-entry PhD programmes are much more common. That said, these figures may still provide a useful starting point for evaluating when and why graduate studies end. They remind us, if nothing else, of the great number of doctoral candidates who never finish their programs.

Having a doctoral dissertation of my own to complete, I will gladly let others pore more rigorously over the data quoted above, puzzle over its inconsistencies and attempt to discern its meanings. I will merely conclude with the obvious: despite a dip in the late 1990s, the number of graduate students in history in Canadian universities has been growing, and it will apparently continue to grow. Perhaps the time will come to collectively address the reality that the production of doctors in history outpaces the demand for them, and that some of the most fundamental premises of doctoral studies need to be rethought. For the time being, however, what is important, and what must continue to be at the core of departmental planning and student demands, is that the financial and human resources made available to those who are passionate or foolish enough to attempt graduate studies remain undiluted. Having a clearer and better founded sense of the state of affairs can only help.



1 This report may be consulted online at http://www.cags.ca/Portals/34/pdf/37th_Statistical_Report.pdf.

2 The data presented here is extracted from Robert B. Townsend, "What Do We Know about History PhDs?", *Perspectives on History*, (December 2006), available online at www.historians.org/ Perspectives/issues/2006/0612/0612new3.cfm; "Challenges for History Doctoral Programs and Students: Rising Admissions and High Attrition", *Perspectives on History* (May 2008) www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2008/0805/0805new1.cfm.
The preliminary analysis of the data collected during the summer of 2008 was published in Townsend, "Number of History PhDs Rising Again, but Job Openings Keep Pace." *Perspectives on History* (January 2008). www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2008/0801/0801new1.cfm. Of possible interest to readers may be Thomas Bender, Philip M. Katz and Colin Palmer's *The Education of Historians for the Twenty-first Century* (Urbana: American Historical Association and University of Illinois Press, 2004).
It may be consulted online at www.historians.org/projects/cge/2004/ Report/ index.html.

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